

REPORT OF MUSEUM COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the Council of the Academy held on February 24, 1932, the recommendation of the Committee on Museum that the Academy establish a medical museum, was approved. This is a very important and far-reaching step and will require considerable thought and planning on the part of the Museum Committee. There are a number of questions which should be given consideration in regard to the plan and scope of the proposed museum, its educational usefulness, and how it may be established and developed.

A medical museum, in the broadest sense, might be one of four types, or it might combine any two or more of these types: Anthropology, Public Health and Hygiene, History of Medicine and Modern Medicine.

ANTHROPOLOGY

The American Museum of Natural History includes in its collections a certain number of exhibits of different races of mankind, showing their characteristics, habits and environment. It also has maintained exhibits of bacteria. It is concerned essentially with the exhibition of different races of mankind and the development of the human species, whereas the proposed museum should deal with man's environment and its influence upon his life. In the modern sense the complete story of man's environment would naturally include certain aspects of housing, industry, agriculture, habits of living, diet, hygiene, and public health.

HYGIENE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

The development of a Museum of Hygiene and Public Health should include an exhibition which will emphasize all facts and procedures utilized in the maintenance of the public health. This would include water supply and purification, milk supply, pasteurization and delivery, sewage disposal, the various measures undertaken to prevent communicable diseases, hospitalization, sanatoria, personal hygiene, habits of living, foods and diets, health appliances, and so on.

HISTORY OF MEDICINE

A museum exhibiting the story of the history of medicine would be primarily of interest to physicians, of less interest to the laity, and would at first have but little direct value for them. It could serve to emphasize the advances in medical knowledge upon which the exhibits in other departments of the museum are based. Even though of greater interest to physicians the historical exhibits could be made useful to the public by interrelating them in this manner with the material in other departments.

MODERN MEDICINE

A museum of modern medicine would include the whole range of medical activity, anatomy, physiology, surgery, pathology and all the other special fields of medicine, and be designed primarily for the education of the public. Like the Museum of Natural History its ability to serve the public is not incompatible with the maintenance of a scientific collection of great value to medicine. It should also be utilized for the education of medical students and physicians and should be a live organization with an intelligent, well-trained staff.

FUNCTIONS COMMON TO ALL MUSEUMS

The successful museum should not only be interesting but of important educational value for the public, and have an influence on the lives of the people who make use of it. A museum would require lecture halls, machinery for publicity and propaganda, work rooms, display halls and a well-trained educational and technical staff.

THE PART PLAYED BY THE ACADEMY

It would seem obvious that the question of creating a museum of anthropology must be relegated to the distant future after other departments have been established. A museum of hygiene and public health would require ultimately a large tract of ground, fully as large as a city block and its ultimate cost would run up to many millions.

It is therefore impractical for the Academy to contemplate such a venture at the present time in spite of its undeniable value to the public.

With the limitations of space that will be available in the new addition and also the improbability of being able to secure funds for operation, it would seem wise for the Academy to limit itself at the present time to the utilization of its present material on the history of medicine in New York and to develop plans for the organization of a modern Medical Museum as opportunity offers. The development of such a Medical Museum will require ultimately more land and more money than is now required for the maintenance of the Academy. If and when that time arrives, the question may be raised as to whether such a Medical Museum should be maintained by the Academy, or whether like the Museums of Natural History and of Art and the Botanical and Zoological Gardens, it should be maintained by an independent organization and administered by its own Board of Trustees. Some steps should be taken at the present time so that the establishment of a Medical Museum in New York need not be postponed indefinitely. It seems entirely proper for the Academy to make a beginning in the modest manner which has been proposed, meanwhile maintaining an open mind as to where future development may lead.

